

2006 Introduction

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

Faith as a personal choice and an essential freedom is a cornerstone of the American character, rooted in the vision of our founding fathers. Freedom of religion has been one of our foremost liberties from the birth of our nation to this day, and the resolve of Americans to champion that freedom – not only at home, but also around the world – has remained steadfast. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has stated, "There is no more fundamental issue for the United States than freedom of religion and religious conscience. This country was founded on that basis, and it is at the heart of democracy."

Religious liberty is America's "first freedom," enshrined in the First Amendment of our Bill of Rights. In the same way, freedom of religion is a cornerstone of universal human rights, for it encompasses freedom of speech, assembly, and conscience, which together form the foundation for democratic governance and respect for the individual. For this reason the growth of democracy we are witnessing today has gone hand in hand with a growth in religious freedom and other human rights. Freedom House, which annually categorizes each nation as "free," "partly free," or "not free" based on a wide range of criteria, including religious freedom, estimated that 44 countries were "free" in 1972, the first year that it released its country ratings. By last year, that number had risen to 89 countries. The number of "not free" countries, in turn, has fallen from 68 in 1972 to 45 today.

Yet, while democracy and respect for basic freedoms have gained ground throughout the world, many governments still pay no more than lip service to their responsibilities under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international agreements. In too many countries, governments refuse to recognize and protect religious freedom. A number of governments actively work against this foundational right. And in some nations today, violent extremists, exploiting religion in the service of an ideology of intolerance and hate, direct their attacks against those who seek only to worship according to the dictates of their conscience. Even as we stand together with those who rightly demand religious freedom, we stand firmly against those who, whether acting on behalf of governments or on behalf of organizations that manipulate faith for violent purposes, impede human liberty and democracy.

The Annual Report on International Religious Freedom was established as a means to help promote and protect this universal right. The report seeks to shed light in those parts of the world where religious persecution is perpetrated, and by that light to impede its progress. The very process underlying the report, of investigating, documenting, and protesting abuses, can help mitigate the violations. That so many endure beatings, torture, and imprisonment, yet remain committed to their beliefs, sometimes even to the point of death, is a testament to the strength and resilience of their faith. The Annual Report on International Religious Freedom testifies to this strength, speaking for the many millions who continue to suffer on the basis of their religious identity, belief, or practice.

This report is a natural outgrowth of our country's history. That which is precious to us, we urge others to protect and preserve as well. Our own record as a nation on this and other freedoms is not perfect. However, our imperfections cannot serve as an excuse to retreat from the challenge of working to make this universal right a reality for all humankind.

As the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, with responsibility to both the President and the Secretary of State as principal advisor on advancing religious freedom worldwide, it is my mission and that of my office to stand with those who seek and promote religious freedom, and against those who would stifle it. Under my direction, the Office of International Religious Freedom undertakes a wide range of activities aimed at implementing U.S. policy on religious freedom, working closely with colleagues in the Department of State and U.S. embassies overseas in order to bring the full set of diplomatic tools to bear on the issue. Through formal and informal bilateral negotiations with foreign governments, participation in multilateral fora such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe,

cooperation with human rights and faith-based NGOs, and meetings with victims of abuse, we develop and carry out strategies to address persecution wherever it is found.

As we present to Congress and the public this eighth edition of the Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, I wish to express my gratitude for the strong and vigilant leadership of President Bush and Secretary of State Rice on this issue, as well as for the bipartisan support which Congress has provided. We all owe a debt of gratitude, as well, to so many who work in non-governmental organizations on behalf of the oppressed.

The good news, as the Freedom House ranking of countries shows, is that together we are making progress. But clearly, enormous challenges remain. "As the United States advances the cause of liberty," President Bush has said, "we remember that freedom is not America's gift to the world, but God's gift to each man and woman in this world. This truth drives our efforts to help people everywhere achieve freedom of religion and establish a better, brighter and more peaceful future for all."

It is to the courageous men, women, and children around the world who suffer because of their faith that we dedicate this annual report. May it provide some measure of encouragement to their aspirations and some hope that their story is not untold, nor their plight forgotten in the press of world affairs.

John V. Hanford III, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom